When and How to Wash Your Hands

Handwashing is one of the best ways to protect yourself and your family from getting sick. Learn when and how you should wash your hands to stay healthy.

February 28, 2020 By Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

---

Wash Your Hands Often to Stay Healthy

You can help yourself and your loved ones stay healthy by washing your hands often, especially during these key times when you are likely to get and spread germs:

- Before, during, and after preparing food
- Before eating food
- Before and after caring for someone at home who is sick with vomiting or diarrhea
- Before and after treating a cut or wound
- After using the toilet
- After changing diapers or cleaning up a child who has used the toilet
- After blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing
- After touching an animal, animal feed, or animal waste
- After handling pet food or pet treats
- After touching garbage

Follow Five Steps to Wash Your Hands the Right Way

Washing your hands is easy, and it’s one of the most effective ways to prevent the spread of germs. Clean hands can stop germs from spreading from one person to another and throughout an entire community—from your home and workplace to childcare facilities and hospitals.

Follow these five steps every time.

1. Wet your hands with clean, running water (warm or cold), turn off the tap, and apply soap.
2. Lather your hands by rubbing them together with the soap. Lather the backs of your hands, between your fingers, and under your nails.

3. Scrub your hands for at least 20 seconds. Need a timer? Hum the “Happy Birthday” song from beginning to end twice.
4. Rinse your hands well under clean, running water.
5. Dry your hands using a clean towel or air dry them.

Use Hand Sanitizer When You Can’t Use Soap and Water

Washing hands with soap and water is the best way to get rid of germs in most situations. If soap and water are not readily available, you can use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol. You can tell if the sanitizer contains at least 60% alcohol by looking at the product label.

Sanitizers can quickly reduce the number of germs on hands in many situations. However,

- Sanitizers do not get rid of all types of germs.
- Hand sanitizers may not be as effective when hands are visibly dirty or greasy.
- Hand sanitizers might not remove harmful chemicals from hands like pesticides and heavy metals.

How to use hand sanitizer

- Apply the gel product to the palm of one hand (read the label to learn the correct amount).
- Rub your hands together.
- Rub the gel over all the surfaces of your hands and fingers until your hands are dry. This should take around 20 seconds.

This was originally published on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.cancerhealth.com/article/wash-handsa